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Memoirs of a Hush Hush Agent

By TOM DONNELLY

I FEEL sorry for CIA director Richard M. Helms. He would never have written that letter to that St. Louis newspaper if somebody had only told him that in the nation's Capital there is no such thing as free speech. Certainly not for heads of government agencies.

As everybody knows by now, The St. Louis Globe-Democrat ran an editorial which called Sen. J. William Fulbright (D., Ark.) "a crafty Arkansan" and said he had received his "comeuppance" in the Senate vote that denied his committee representation on a CIA watchdog committee. Mr. Helms wrote a letter to the editor, saying, "I want to let you know of my pleasure in reading the editorial titled Brickbats for Fulbright."

What's more, Mr. Helms signed his name.

Naturally all hell broke loose.

Sen. Wayne Morse, who can always be depended upon to launch the first counter-offensive (on any issue, anytime, anywhere) has demanded Mr. Helms' resignation. This attack by Sen. Morse, veteran Capitol observers report, has aroused a certain sympathy for Mr. Helms. It is felt that any man denounced by Wayne Morse can't be all bad.

The CIA isn't supposed to operate within the U.S.; Sen. Morse says it must be assumed that the Helms letter is "only a small segment of what is going on that is unsigned or unrevealed as to its CIA source."

It's just possible Sen. Morse has something here. (It is felt by some Capitol observers that

Wayne Morse can't be all wrong.) I've often wondered about some of those letters to the editors signed by obviously made-up names like "Indignant Citizen" and "Heartbroken Mother" and "Patriotic American." It's usually mighty difficult to figure out what those letter writers are getting at. You think the point is that small kids make too much noise and ought to be stopped, or that there is entirely too much drunken driving these days. But all of a sudden you're off on a detour, like the communists invented the frug, or high school sex, or are responsible for the increase in purse-snatching at drive-in movies. Now if some of these communications are being planted by the CIA for its own labyrinthine motivations it's no wonder the average reader finds them so mysterious. Only a CIA man can tell what the purpose of the letter is, and whether that purpose has been achieved.

What I want to know is: Why didn't any of Mr. Helms' underlings brief him on the setup here in Washington? An agency head, or even a filing clerk, SIMPLY DOES NOT congratulate ANYBODY WHATSOEVER for in any way criticizing the Senate. At least, NOT IN WRITING. Some CIA agent certainly should have advised Mr. Helms of the tempers, crotchets, superstitions, beliefs and attitudes of the most important tribe in Washington. The Helms episode indicates that we may have another example of faulty liaison work here, another failure of the CIA to read the mood of the natives accurately.

I hope Congress doesn't launch an investigation. That way we'll never find out what really happened.

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